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## **Mercury Emissions: Idaho group tests air on Carlin Trend**

**By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer**

ELKO - Air samples show higher mercury levels downwind of gold-mining operations on the Carlin Trend, according to Justin Hayes of the Idaho Conservation League.

"Carlin is receiving a fair amount of mercury," he said. "It's 10 times the amount you would expect."

Carlin showed 50 nanograms per cubic liter and a baseline of 5 nanograms, while Hayes said he got a much higher reading near Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc. operations, more than 700 nanograms per cubic liter.

U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration uses micrograms, however, for mercury standards.

Newmont Mining Corp.'s environmental director for North American operations, John Mudge, said MSHA's standard for workers is 50 micrograms per cubic meter and industrial hygienists recommend 25 micrograms.

### **Perspective**

To put that in perspective, he said the 713 nanograms Hayes measured near Goldstrike equates to 0.71 micrograms.

And Mudge said Newmont frequently tests employees at the processing facilities to be sure they are not exposed to more mercury than MSHA allows.

"We've put systems in place to protect the workers," he said.

Hayes said a complete report on the monitoring in Elko County will be coming out soon, and Mudge said he needs to see the research before forming his own opinions.

The Idaho Conservation League began delving into the question of whether Nevada mines were exporting mercury in the air to Idaho after hearing complaints about the high mercury content in fish in Idaho's waters.

Hayes said his tests near the Carlin mines and Jerritt Canyon Mine north of Elko answer the question of whether there is more mercury around the mines, "but it doesn't attempt to answer whether this mercury is going to Idaho."

### **Utah concerns**

Utah also has raised alarms about mercury in the Great Salt Lake, and Hayes said he wants to see all three states working together and with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to monitor mercury emissions.

"It's got to be multi-state at this point," said Hayes, who is the league's program director.

Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, meanwhile, is focusing on strengthening a voluntary program with EPA and gold producers in Nevada, according to Deputy NDEP Administrator Colleen Cripps.

NDEP will look at the Idaho Conservation League report, but regardless of the figures, the key is to continue reducing mercury emissions, Cripps said.

She said there is no question the mines emit mercury, based on their toxic release inventory reports, and "we need to do everything we can to control mercury emissions.

"We're not researchers, but we focus on controlling mercury," she said.

Barrick Gold Corp. spokesman Vince Borg said Barrick needs more information before commenting on the Idaho league's study, but he said Barrick is focused on reducing mercury emissions.

"We're working with Nevada and the EPA on further measures that could be adopted," he said.

"We regard mercury as a global issue and everyone has to do their part," Borg said.

Cripps also said the latest data from the Idaho Conservation League still will not show whether the mercury is from local sources, naturally occurring or from global sources.

Nevada Mining Association President Russ Fields wrote in the latest association newsletter that UNR research shows mercury emissions into the air in Nevada from soils and hot springs are nine times as high each year as mining emissions.

## Mercury in fish

Mercury in the air isn't the key health issue, Cripps said. It's mercury getting into the water and being digested by fish people eat that is the health issue.

Mercury is a neurotoxin that builds up in the food chain, and high exposures can damage a human brain and nervous system.

Meanwhile, NDEP has been in contact with Utah and Idaho agencies on the mercury issue, and "there are a whole bunch of things going on we've been trying to coordinate," Cripps said.

NDEP also is planning to ask EPA for a grant for more research at the University of Nevada, Reno, she said.

UNR has already been looking at mercury, and NDEP spokeswoman Cindy Petterson said today that while that research has not been published, "findings so far don't show anything significant."

Hayes met with NDEP earlier regarding mercury, and he confirmed late last week the Idaho Conservation League is holding off on a federal lawsuit against EPA while seeing what Nevada can do voluntarily.

"Reiterating something I have said before, we're really interested in seeing some action," Hayes said. "The facilities are still among the highest mercury polluters in the United States."

Elyssa Rosen of Great Basin Mine Watch said recently the nonprofit organization also would rather work with the state and industry "to come up with parameters. Ideally, we would like something

cohesive.

"If they don't do it soon, groups outside the state will push it at the federal level," Rosen said. "This is an extremely important issue."

### Monitoring

Hayes said he did all his monitoring from public roads a couple of weeks ago, using the baseline of 5 nanograms per cubic liter. He said he recorded 0 to 5 nanograms per cubic liter in winds from the north to come up with the baseline.

"The wind had a very significant impact on where we detected elevated mercury levels," Hayes said, reporting he took the readings east, west and north and south of the Carlin Trend but none in Elko.

He used a portable machine that measured wind speed, wind direction, temperature and mercury levels.

Hayes said his air monitoring near Jerriitt Canyon showed readings lower than those in Carlin, but he said he could not get downwind of the mine.

Once the league's findings are compiled, Hayes said he wants people to look at the report critically "and poke holes in it."

The mines and NDEP began working with EPA after the first toxic release inventory figures came out showing high mercury emissions. EPA does not have any standards on mercury emissions from hard-rock mining.

The question of whether the Nevada mines are to blame for high mercury levels in fish in Idaho and high levels of mercury in Utah's Great Salt Lake is newer.

"Where did they think the mercury is going?" Hayes asked.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --